

A New Quest Hub

Iris glanced over at the wagon that was rumbling along the cobblestone streets of Brightburn. Making their way through the gates was surprisingly easy and saw Iris back riding on Mocha while Sera had moved to the front to sit with Tanith. Despite the potent medieval city smells, the abundance of flowers and plant life everywhere tempered the atmosphere more than she expected. Greenery and colorful blooms adorned every building and lined every sidewalk. It was a refreshing sight, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder at the city's dedication to its aesthetic.

“So, you two hit up the Merchant Guild and I’ll head to the City Guard to report the attack?” Iris called over to the two.

Sera nodded back. “Yes, we’ll settle the contract, then meet up at the Banking Guild? I need to meet with the company, as well. Then together we all meet the lady?”

“Sounds like a plan. See you guys soon!” Iris replied with a smile.

Tanith and Sera waved as Iris followed the sign that led to the nearest office of the City Guard. She’d considered doing it at the gate, but Tanith had explained that the city didn’t like that unless it was an emergency as it slowed traffic through the gate.

The city was a stark contrast to the wilds they had traversed to get here, with stone buildings towering over them and streets lined with shops and stalls selling all kinds of goods. The smells of cooking food and the scent of fresh flowers wafted through the air, and the sound of conversation filled the streets.

As they made their way through the bustling streets, the sounds of horse hooves mixed with the chatter of people, creating a lively and vibrant atmosphere. Merchants hawked their wares, street performers put on shows, and locals went about their daily routines. Iris took it all in, enjoying the hustle and bustle of the city.

She marveled at the architecture of the buildings around her. Towers and spires reached toward the sky, and intricate carvings and decorations adorned the facades, not to mention all of the colorful banners and signs advertising various shops and establishments.

Iris was a city girl, through and through.

She let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping as she took in the reality of her situation. Mocha let out a soft neigh of concern, prompting Iris to lean in and pat her horse's neck, letting her hand rest there.

“It's okay, girl. I'm just trying to process everything. I built this up in my head, and now it's actually happening. It's overwhelming, you know?”

Mocha pushed a bit against Iris's hand, as if in understanding. Iris took a deep breath and straightened her posture, shaking off the weight of her thoughts. “But we've come this far, and I can't let my nerves get the best of me now. We'll figure it out.”

Shaking off her thoughts, Iris urged Mocha forward, the soft clopping of hooves marking their progress through the busy city streets.

Iris dismounted Mocha and led her horse to the side of the building, where there was a place to tie her up. Mocha snorted her displeasure at being treated like a common horse, where she was a queen amongst the equine race, but she bore it with good grace. Iris patted her on the neck again before turning toward the City Guard's office.

Before entering, she took a deep breath and nodded then pushed open the heavy wooden door to the office. The interior was dimly lit, with sconces mounted on the walls and a large desk at the far end of the room. A high elf man sat behind the desk, flipping through a book. He looked up as Iris entered, nodding in greeting.

"Greetings, if you would please give me a moment, I will be right with you," he said politely.

Iris smiled. "That's fine!"

The man nodded again and went back to his book.

Iris took a moment to glance around the room, noting the various maps and charts pinned to the walls. After a few minutes, the man behind the desk closed his book and stood up.

"Apologies for the delay, how may I assist you?" he asked, looking at Iris with a curious expression.

Iris took a deep breath and straightened her posture. "I was hired to guard a merchant who was traveling here to Brightburn from Cosdale," she explained. She hesitated on how to continue. She didn't want to give away that she was approached by terrans. That would be an issue, she narrowed her eyes and continued, "...People who claimed affiliation with the Marauder Prince approached me in Stilstead. I wasn't aware of this until we reached the bridge just beyond the village where we were stopped by a well-armored group of men who claimed to be collecting a toll—"

"I need to stop you there, I apologize," the man said as he rubbed at his temples. He turned around and cupped his mouth. "Captain! You need to hear this!"

The man's call was answered by the sound of footsteps, and soon a high-elven woman in City Guard armor appeared from a door at the back of the room. She looked at Iris expectantly.

"What's the issue?" the captain asked, her tone brusque and no-nonsense.

The woman made Iris's eyes widen. She... she was *cute*.

Iris repeated her story—trying hard not to get flustered—this time including the part about the fight on the bridge. The captain's expression hardened as Iris spoke, and by the time she finished, the captain was already barking orders to her subordinates. "Get a squad together and patrol the hills. Bring any suspicious-looking individuals in for questioning. And send word to the Merchant Guild to inform them of the situation."

Turning back to Iris, the captain fixed her with a stern gaze. “Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We take the safety of our merchants very seriously here in Brightburn. While the area we patrol is limited, we will ensure that they are bandit free.”

Iris nodded, impressed. “You do things much differently than Cosdale,” she murmured.

The elf chuckled. “Good.” She crossed her arms. “Is that waste of space, Morek still the captain of the Guard there?” she asked.

“Ugh, Morek!” Iris exclaimed in frustration. “If I see him again, I may have to punch him a second time.”

The captain raised a brow in surprise. “A second time?”

Iris responded eagerly, “Oh, let me tell you—”

But the captain raised her hand while chuckling and suggested, “Wait, come with me. I have a bottle of clarus in my office. I prefer a shot before a good story,” she said with a disarming smile. “I’m Kaira Harken, Captain of the Southern Garrison.”

With a warm smile, Iris reached out her hand. “Iris Stuart, Adventurer.”

As they clasped hands, the captain tilted her head inquisitively. “Adventurer?” she echoed, her tone laced with curiosity.

Iris felt a blush creeping up her cheeks as the captain held on for a moment longer than expected. Trying to regain her composure, Iris chuckled and suggested, “Let’s grab some drinks and I’ll share a story with you. And maybe even a proposal.”

I have several proposals for you...

Kaira’s lips curled up into a feral grin as she regarded Iris with a calculated look. “Sounds like fun,” she said. “I’d be delighted to hear *whatever* you want to say, especially if it involves a story about punching that Moronic Morek.”

Iris smiled.

A new Quest Giver appears.



Iris walked out of the Guard’s Office a bell later, a bit tipsy and filled with smiles. Her chat with Kaira had gone really well with the two getting to know each other over shots of a local liquor similar to Korean soju. She glanced down at the bottle in her hand, her smile growing.

Can’t wait to chat with her again.

And see that cute butt.

She looked up and saw Mocha staring at her. Standing in front of the building with a high elf guard next to the horse.

Iris stumbled slightly as she walked towards Mocha, still feeling the effects of the liquor. She approached the guard and the horse, trying to appear composed. "Is everything okay?" she asked, her voice slightly slurred.

The guard gave her a skeptical look before answering. "I was just wondering if this horse belongs to you," he said, eyeing Mocha.

Iris nodded, patting Mocha's mane. "Yes, she's mine. Is there a problem?"

The guard looked at her with suspicion. "You seem a bit... unsteady," he said, gesturing to her swaying form.

She chuckled, feeling a bit embarrassed. "I may have had a drink or two with the Captain," she admitted.

The guard rolled his eyes. "I see. Well, just be careful. We don't want any trouble in Brightburn."

She nodded seriously. "Of course! I am going to be around her—*here!*—often, ya know. I'm an adventurer."

Whew. That was close. Smooth, Iris.

The man raised a brow and sighed before stepping close. "Just so you know, the captain can drink anyone under the table. You didn't keep drinking just because she did, did you?"

Iris blinked, as she put the bottle of clarus that Kaira had gifted her into Mocha's saddlebag. "That is..." She sighed. "That's exactly what happened."

The man patted her shoulder reassuringly, the gesture making the clanking of her armor ring in her ears.

He stopped when he saw her wincing. "Sorry... I didn't think that through. Guess we have that in common," he said with a soft chuckle. "Do you need help getting to your inn?"

Iris's eyes widened. "Shit! I am supposed to meet Sera and Tanith at the Banking Guild."

The man sighed and looked over at one of the guards standing outside the office. "Hey, got another victim of the captain's clarus introduction. I'm going to escort her over to the Banking Guild and then her inn."

The guard started laughing and waved them off.

Iris struggled to mount her saddle, needing three attempts to finally get herself onto Mocha's back. The horse clearly expressed her displeasure with a series of annoyed snorts. The guard accompanying them walked beside the two as they made their way

toward the Banking Guild. Iris hunched forward, groaning and cursing herself, feeling nauseated. She should have eaten before drinking.

I'm so dumb!

“Mocha, why?” she mumbled, her horse responding with another snort and a series of neighs.

“I vaguely recall swearing off drinking... But it was only seven shots!” Iris protested.

The guard chuckled. “You're talking to a horse. You may have had more to drink than you think.”

Both Iris and Mocha shot the guard a look that made him quickly raise his hands in apology. “Sorry! Wait... Your horse's name is Mocha?”

Mocha snorted in response.

The guard laughed. “Sorry, your name is Mocha?”

Mocha confirmed her name with a low nicker, and Iris found herself enjoying the interaction between her horse and the guard.

“Wait, can you understand what I'm saying?” he asked Mocha in disbelief.

Mocha nodded her head in response, leaving the guard with his jaw dropped and stammering.

The high elf's eyes widened. “That's incredible! Can you communicate with other animals too?”

Mocha shook her head.

“Ah, just people then,” the guard said with a chuckle. “Well, it's a pleasure to meet a horse with such a unique talent.”

Mocha neighed softly in response, seeming to appreciate the compliment.

The guard shook his head in disbelief. “This is amazing. I've never met a horse who could understand Common so well before,” he said, still staring at Mocha in amazement.

Iris chuckled. “Yeah, she's one of a kind. I think she's more human than horse sometimes.”

The elf looked up at her in confusion. “Human?”

“Sorry, I meant terran,” she clarified.

I really need to find out who started that and punch them.

The man's eyes darted toward her ears before widening. “Oh, wow. I've never met a terran before either. Two incredible things in one day!”

Iris rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” she said with a grin. “But it's not that big of a deal. I'm just like any other person, except I happen to be from a different world.”

The guard nodded, still looking a little starstruck. “That's amazing. So, what brings you to our city?”

Iris shrugged. “Escorting a merchant, requesting aid of the city's lady for a village due to a harpy attack, starting an Adventurer's Guild, and maybe finding some quests to make some money,” she said nonchalantly.

The elf opened and closed his mouth a few times, before shaking his head in amazement. “That is a lot.”

Iris chuckled. “It's busy, is what it is.”

The three finally arrived at the Banking Guild, where they saw Sera and Tanith waiting for them. Sera had a book in her hand, while Tanith was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Upon seeing Iris and Mocha's disheveled state, Sera raised an eyebrow and Tanith smirked.

As they approached the building, Iris turned to the guard. “Thanks for walking with us. I think I can manage from here.”

The guard nodded sympathetically. “Well, good luck with your tasks. And it was great meeting you and your...uh, unique horse.”

Iris grinned. “Likewise. See you around.”

He started to turn, but then thought twice and focused on her. “Just so you know...” he started, seemingly hesitant to speak up. “And don't tell anyone I told you, but the captain only brings out the clarus for bad days and when she's meeting someone she is potentially interested in.”

Both of Iris's brows raised at that. “Well then. Thanks for telling me. She did offer to meet up and show me around the city.”

Ah, yeah. I got game.

The man laughed. “Then I think you'll have a good time, Iris.”

She smiled, saying goodbye as the man walked away.

I wonder if anyone will believe his gossip if he leads with the whole talking to a horse thing.

Iris dismounted from Mocha and could feel her legs still wobbling from the liquor. She walked unsteadily toward Sera and Tanith, hoping they wouldn't notice her state. Mocha let out a snort and a whinny as if laughing at her, but Iris chose to ignore it.

Way to call me out!

Sera sighed. “How are you already drunk?”

Iris gasped. “I am not! The captain simply wanted to get the whole story and thought that such a story would be best told with shots.”

Tanith laughed and Sera rolled her eyes.

“Well, good thing you took so long. It gave me time to go by the headquarters. I have your fee, including hazard rates for the monster bird, harpy, and bandit attacks,” the woman said, ticking off her fingers as she listed the situations they’d gotten into.

Iris looked around, her eyes narrowing. “Is that where your wagon is?”

Sera nodded. “Yes. Fenren Merchant Company has a warehouse and stables in the city for our traveling merchants.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Where will you guys be staying while here?”

The high elf woman raised a brow. “I requested time off due to all of the attacks. Need time to recover, and all that. I did promise you I’d help you start your guild. That’s going to take some time.”

Tanith stepped forward. “I also took some time. Almost dying to monsters and bandits has an effect on a man. So, looks like you have both of us to help you out.”

“That’s great news, thank you both,” Iris said with a smile. “I’m really looking forward to working with you on this. I think we can make something amazing happen here in the city.”

Sera nodded. “Agreed. And with the two of us here, we can really get things moving quickly. We just need to figure out where to start.”

Iris thought for a moment before speaking. “Let’s go meet with the lady—”

Tanith shook his head. “Oh no. We weren’t supposed to arrive until later tonight. It’s still early. You’re going to the inn and resting.”

Sera laughed. “He’s right. There’s no way we’re letting you meet Lady Arden in that state.”

Iris squinted her eyes. “Lady Arden? I thought we were meeting the lady of Brightburn?”

The merchant snorted. “And that’s Lady Arden! ...Wait, did you—did you think that her name was Lady Brightburn?”

Iris fidgeted. “Well... when you put it like that...”

Tanith, Sera, and even Mocha all laughed.

Jerks.



Brightburn castle was an imposing sight in the evening hours, standing tall and proud atop a hill overlooking the city. The walls were made of gray stone that had withstood the test of time, but were covered in moss and other vegetation that gave them a sense of age and history. The turrets and battlements were well-preserved, though there were a few places where the stonework was chipped or cracked. The castle's entrance was a large wooden gate, reinforced with iron bands and guarded by two stern-looking soldiers in chainmail armor. Beyond the gate lay a courtyard paved with cobblestones and surrounded by the castle's walls.

As Iris, Sera, and Tanith approached the castle, the two men stepped in front of them, their hands tightening on their pikes.

“Halt. What business do you have at the castle?” one of the guards demanded.

“We have come to meet with Lady Arden,” Sera replied calmly.

The guards exchanged a look before one of them spoke again. “Lady Arden is not expecting any visitors. State your names and your business, or you will not be allowed inside.”

Iris stepped forward, her hands raised in a placating gesture. “I understand the caution, but we have urgent matters to discuss with Lady Arden. I have an urgent message from the reeve of Stilstead village regarding attacks,” she said while reaching into her satchel to pull out the rolled-up letter.

The guards eyed Iris warily as she handed the letter to them. After a brief moment of scrutiny, one of the guards nodded and handed the letter to the other. “We'll have to verify this,” he said before disappearing behind the gate.

The three waited patiently, glancing around at the castle's surroundings. The courtyard was bustling with activity, with armed men and servants going about their business. The sun was starting to set, casting a warm glow over the castle's stone walls and creating long shadows.

After a few tense minutes, the guard returned, a female knight walking with him, and nodded to his companion.

The female knight approached Iris, Sera, and Tanith with a stern expression. “I am Ser Meredith, Lady Arden's chief of guard. What is the urgent matter that requires Lady Arden's attention outside of court hours?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone.

The guard handed the letter to Ser Meredith, who quickly scanned its contents before nodding. She stiffened. “Follow me,” she said

The wooden gate creaked open, and the group made their way into the castle's courtyard, feeling the weight of history and power that emanated from the fortress. They walked across the cobblestones and into the castle's main hall.

They didn't even get a chance to admire the elaborate decor before the knight led them through the castle's winding corridors and up a flight of stairs. They eventually

arrived at a set of ornately decorated doors, where Ser Meredith knocked before opening them and gesturing for the three to enter.

Lady Arden was seated behind a large desk, poring over documents, and looked up as they entered. “Ser Meredith, what is the meaning of this interruption?” she asked before noticing Iris, Sera, and Tanith. “Ah, this must be important if the Knight-Captain is escorting guests.”

With that, Ser Meredith stepped forward and handed Lady Arden the letter from Reeve Evelyn.

“Thank you, Meredith,” she said dismissively before focusing on the group of three. “If you would please introduce yourself while I read,” the noble ordered.

Sera curtsied while Tanith bowed, and Iris just... awkwardly bowed her head. The high elf merchant stepped forward. “Lady Arden, please allow me to introduce myself and my companions,” she started. “I am Sera Timrel of the Fenren Merchant Company, and this is Tanith Aldridge one of our guards. With us is Iris Stuart, an adventurer we contracted to join Tanith as an escort from Cosdale to Brightburn.”

Tanith bowed his head and Iris smiled, lifting her hand a bit to wave. Which... just garnered a raised brow.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Timrel,” Lady Arden said, setting aside the letter and folding her hands on the desk. “This letter is concerning. Iris Stuart, you are a terran?”

Iris nodded her head. “I am. Uh... My Lady?”

The woman let out a polite chuckle. “I have met only one other terran and he was just as unused to dealing with the nobility as you. Please, My Lady or Lady Arden is acceptable.”

“You are certainly the first noble that I have met. They are not especially common where I am from,” Iris said

Lady Arden smiled. “Ah, I see. Well, we must do what we can to make you feel welcome here at Brightburn Castle. Now, let us discuss the matter at hand. These... *harpies* as they have been called. Could you please describe them and the level of threat they pose? Ser Meredith, please take heed, as your services may be required.”

The knight saluted. “Understood, milady.”

Iris glanced between the two, waiting for her turn to talk again. She had to say, she didn't really like this situation. It wasn't really her to be all quiet and wait for someone with authority to call upon her.

The Lady focused back on Iris expectantly, so Iris took that as an invitation to start. She started slowly, beginning when they first noticed the harpies, and when she wasn't interrupted, she launched into a full recap of the fight. Tanith jumped in at one point to explain what he and Sera were doing, before the attention was back on Iris.

Iris described the harpies in detail, mentioning their large wings and sharp talons, as well as their vicious screeching. However, it was when she emphasized the danger their magic posed to the villagers and the urgency of the situation that the lady and the knight seemed especially concerned.

“As for the level of threat, they seem to be organized and intelligent. They knew when to retreat and when to attack. And if they are willing to attack a random merchant, who knows what other atrocities they may commit? The magic they showed was formidable and it was only the fact that I am more experienced with my own magic that we were able to even make it away alive,” Iris finished with a note of concern in her voice.

Lady Arden nodded solemnly. “Thank you for your thorough report, Miss Stuart. It seems we must take this threat seriously and take measures to protect our people.”

Ser Meredith stepped forward. “Milady, I suggest we increase patrols around the villages and send scouts to gather information on these harpies. We should also prepare our troops for battle, just in case they decide to attack us here.”

“Agreed,” Lady Arden said, her face set in determination. “I will also send a message to the neighboring lords to warn them of this threat and see if they have any information to share. We cannot let these harpies continue to harm innocent people.”

Sera spoke up. “Lady Arden, if I may suggest, Miss Iris has a novel approach to situations such as this, and such as the bandit attack—”

The noble’s eyes narrowed. “Bandit attack?”

The high elf merchant’s eyes widened and she glanced at Iris for help.

Iris nodded. “Yes, Lady Arden. I reported it this morning, but we were also attacked by bandits belonging to the Marauder Prince just north of Stilstead.”

Her stoic demeanor broke as she sighed and rubbed a hand across her temple. “Please tell me more,” she ground out.

Taking a deep breath, Iris launched into the same report she gave Kaira, ensuring to mention doing so. She told the woman all about the bridge fight, and what it took to defeat them.

“Miss Stuart, did you learn what you know about magic from the Church’s Ceremony of Paths?” Lady Arden asked.

Iris squinted her eyes. “Ceremony of Paths, My Lady? No, I can’t say that I have. What is that?”

“I do not want to lead you astray, but suffice to say, they have learned much concerning this new reality we have found ourselves in. I highly suggest meeting the Umbral Seers at the city temple,” she said.

“I will do that,” Iris promised. It sounded interesting, she was always up for learning more about magic. From what she’d heard, the Church here were actually good people, as well. That was always a plus.

The lady turned back to Sera. “I apologize, I interrupted you. Please, as you were saying?”

Sera smiled. “It is no issue, milady. I wanted to describe the idea that Miss Stuart had. She wishes to create an Adventurer’s Guild, one that provides a formal avenue for entities to recruit skilled individuals like her to do jobs quickly that take time for other entities to pursue, or can’t pursue.”

The noblewoman gazed at Iris thoughtfully, taking in her appearance. “Miss Stuart, what is an adventurer?”

Iris beamed with a smile as she spoke, “What exactly is an adventurer, you ask? An adventurer is a person who takes on quests that no one else wants or can. They're the ones who will help a farmer plagued by monsterized foxes, forming a bond with their horse, or brave a forest teeming with murder hares to gather rare plants for an alchemist's cure to save lives. These fearless souls will venture into the wilds in search of treasure and monsters, offering their aid to those in need for a bit of coin, or perhaps just a new helm. They'll defend a merchant against flocks of harpies, hunt down bandits, or stand alone outside a town wall and fight off a horde of monster drakyyds. They are the embodiment of strength, courage, and an unbreakable will.

“As adventurers, we go to places where destruction must be wrought and do whatever it takes to complete our quests. Our travels take us from one town to the next, often finding ourselves in trouble, whether it's carousing in taverns or crossing paths with the law. We engage in all sorts of shenanigans and acts of badassery, some of which can be violent or even deadly. True adventurers are heroes in their own right, possessing the ability to wield the mana that surrounds us and the power of their will to better the world and overcome any challenge that comes their way.”

The noblewoman sat there, listening attentively to Iris's description. After a moment of contemplation, she spoke up. “It sounds like the life of an adventurer is not for the faint of heart. But I can see the value in having a guild dedicated to their recruitment and organization. It would certainly make it easier for those in need to find skilled individuals to aid them in these... quests. And it would provide a means of support and camaraderie for the adventurers themselves. Miss Stuart, I think your idea has merit, and I would be interested in hearing more about it.”

Iris’s grin grew. “Thank you, Lady Arden.”

The woman raised a hand. “Starting a guild is no small matter. I am sure you have done your due diligence. While Ser Meredith here investigates the matters you have brought before me, I would like to invite you to my ball that I am having in three

days to discuss this proposal in detail. I believe that is ample time for you to obtain suitable attire and an escort.”

“A-an escort?” Iris choked out.

The woman nodded. “Of course, only those looking for a courtship attend alone. I believe you have other business to conduct than to fend off prospective suitors,” she said with a light chuckle. “I look forward to a demonstration of your magic, as well.”

Iris didn’t like the dangerous glint in her eye. She stole a glance at Sera, who also looked like a deer in headlights.

“Y-Yes, Lady Arden,” Iris said. “I look forward to it.”

“Delightful! Ser Meredith will escort you out, and again, thank you for your report. I assure you, we will treat it with the seriousness that it deserves,” Lady Arden reassured them.

Iris just nodded.

Sera thanked the woman and soon the three were following the knight back toward the castle’s gate.

Iris couldn’t believe it. A ball? A date? And only three days to prepare? This was going to be a challenge.

I’d rather face down an entire horde of murder hares.